

AWARDS 2007 VIDEO

EXPERT'S REPORT

2007 was the year in which we expected video products to move to high definition. However, disc and player prices are still high, and there's still no clear winner in the HD DVD and Blu-ray war.

HD movies may still be in their infancy, but there are plenty of HD camcorders around. Prices have almost halved in the past year and our favourite model, the Canon HV20, costs only £627. That's still a lot of money, though, so we've also given an award to the MD101 for those who need an inexpensive camcorder.

Now's an ideal time to buy a hard disk recorder. Our favourite from Top Up TV costs only £99 and is perfect if you don't want to pay for Sky+ or Virgin Media. Alternatively, Windows Vista Home Premium has Media Center built-in, so simply add our favourite TV tuner and you'll soon be in TV heaven.

Seth Barton

Video and games expert

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TERRATEC Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity

Digital TV reception in the UK isn't as good as in many European countries. Because of this, the mini aerials that come bundled with many USB TV tuners are next to useless, unless you live right under a TV transmitter. However, a diversity tuner can boost your reception and means those little aerials aren't completely useless.

Diversity means that a product uses two TV tuners in parallel to improve reception by combining the signal from both. This means it is possible to get a reliable signal when travelling in a car or on a train. As there are two tuners, each requires a mini aerial. Ideally, they should be placed around one metre apart.

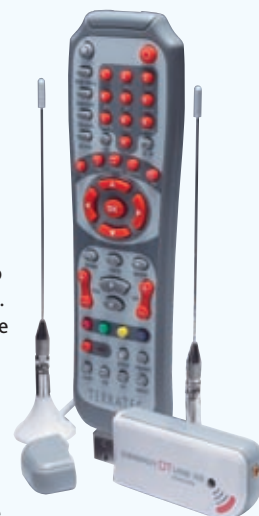
We first saw diversity tuners in early 2007, and Terratec's Cinergy is our favourite example. It comes with the best antennas we've seen. They have both magnetic and suction-cup bases, and they also have a hinge at the base of the aerial so they can be easily positioned for better reception.

You can also use the dual tuners in a more traditional way to watch one programme while recording another. Dual-tuner support is flexible using the Terratec Home Cinema software, and you can watch, timeshift or record multiple channels from a single multiplex using just one tuner (a multiplex is a group of around five channels). This means you can potentially record two programmes at once while still being able to browse the remaining handful of channels in those multiplexes. A splitter is provided with the tuner so that a single rooftop aerial can be connected to both tuners.

The supplied software is easy to use and all the icons on the interface are self-explanatory. Channels are separated into TV and radio broadcasts, so you can choose which to browse. Menus are clearly laid out and it's easy to get everything up and running. There's a well-designed remote control that works with the built-in IR receiver. It's comfortable and all the buttons are clearly labelled.

It's a shame that the electronic programme guide (EPG) doesn't use the timeline layout that works so well in Windows Media Center. However, it does display clear programme information on a channel-by-channel basis. You can also use the Cinergy with Windows Media Center, though you can't use the diversity function with it.

If you're struggling to get digital TV reception with a portable or mini aerial, this tuner is exactly what you need. Even if you have a rooftop aerial, its dual tuners could revolutionise your TV viewing habits. Terratec's Cinergy is a very useful product at an affordable price.



EXTERNAL TV TUNER 2x DVB-T tuners, USB Hi-Speed interface, 2x RF and built-in IR inputs **PART CODE** 10456 **LATEST PRICE** £88 inc VAT from www.broadbandbuyer.co.uk **DETAILS** <http://uk.terratec.net> **FULL REVIEW** Nov 2007



CANON HV20

HD camcorders have fallen in price considerably since our awards last year. The HV20 costs £627, yet supports exciting new features such as progressive scan. This gives your footage a more defined look and feel, as whole frames are captured and played back, rather than the usual interlaced fields.

Image quality is superb, with vibrant colours and plenty of detail. The LCD screen has 211,000 pixels, and the battery lasts 99 minutes. Footage is stored on MiniDV tapes, which may seem old-fashioned, but they're cheap to buy.

This is not only one of the cheapest HD camcorders available, but it's also one of the best. If you have an HD TV, the HV20 is a great choice.



HD CAMCORDER MiniDV storage, 10x optical zoom, 1/2-in 2.96-megapixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, HDMI, component, composite and phono outputs, USB Hi-speed and FireWire interfaces **PART CODE** 2060B006AA **LATEST PRICE** £627 inc VAT from www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.canon.co.uk **FULL REVIEW** Oct 2007



TOP UP TV Top Up TV DTR

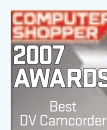
The Top Up TV set-top box has dual Freeview tuners, and can receive one channel while recording another, or record two channels at once. Recordings are scheduled from an easy-to-use timeline EPG, and you can record whole series at the press of a button. You can also pause and rewind live TV.

There's a card slot so you can add the Top Up TV service. This downloads extra programming to the 160GB hard disk overnight. Subscription is optional, though, as is live Premiership football from Setanta Sports.

You can store up to 90 hours of TV on the hard disk, though this is shared between your own recordings and the on-demand service. Whether you subscribe or not, this set-top box is great value.



HARD DISK RECORDER 2x digital tuner, 160GB hard disk, RF input, RF output, 2x scart, S-video, composite, stereo phono and coaxial S/PDIF output **LATEST PRICE** £99 inc VAT from www.topuptv.com **DETAILS** www.topuptv.com **FULL REVIEW** Jul 2007



CANON MD101

MiniDV camcorders still offer the best quality for non-HD video. This Canon model costs less than £150 including VAT but produces excellent video when shooting in good lighting conditions. Footage is stored on MiniDV tape.

The design is excellent: the body feels sturdy and controls are just where you'd want them. The widescreen LCD screen clearly shows what you're shooting, while a small joystick below it controls playback and menu functions.

The small battery lasts 108 minutes, and you can upgrade to a larger one for around £30. Ports are limited, with no USB, so make sure your PC has a FireWire port. Other than that, this is a great camcorder at a bargain price.



DV CAMCORDER MiniDV storage, 30x optical zoom, 1/2-in 800,000 pixel CCD, 2.7in LCD screen, composite and phono output, FireWire interface **PART CODE** 1881B007AA **LATEST PRICE** £144 inc VAT from www.amazon.co.uk **DETAILS** www.canon.co.uk **FULL REVIEW** Aug 2007

TERRATEC Cinergy HT Express

★★★

£69 inc VAT

USB TV tuners can now be bought for less than £25. They may be small, but they still protrude messily from your notebook and take up a USB port. However, most new notebooks now have fast ExpressCard expansion slots, and this is the first ExpressCard TV tuner we've seen to take advantage of these.

The card uses the ExpressCard/34 standard, which is the slimmer of the two types, so it will fit in to any ExpressCard slot. It isn't thick enough to accommodate a full-sized RF input, but an adaptor is included for using a standard aerial lead.

The mini antenna plugs directly into the card, and comes with both magnetic and suction-cup bases. However, like all portable antennas, you'll need to be near a transmitter to

get a watchable picture from it, otherwise you're likely to see a fuzzy or blocky image.

The tuner can receive both analogue and DVB-T broadcasts, and picture quality was good on both, with little noise on analogue and few picture artefacts when using the digital tuner. We had trouble with the supplied version of Terratec's Home Cinema software when switching between analogue and digital broadcasts. We recommend downloading the latest version for free from the firm's website.

The interface is easy to use, though, and menus are largely self-explanatory. The EPG doesn't have our preferred timeline layout, as used by Windows Media Center, and instead shows the information from one channel at a time. You can schedule recordings from the EPG, though, and it

marks them for future reference.

A free one-year subscription to TVTV is provided, worth £15. This excellent online EPG provides newspaper-style listings and lets you schedule recordings from your browser, wherever you happen to be.

Our only real complaint about the Cinergy HT Express is the price. It's considerably more expensive than similar USB hybrid tuners, and it doesn't come with a remote control. It's worth buying only if you're desperately short of USB ports. If you only want digital TV reception, you should seriously consider the dual-tuner Cinergy DT USB XS Diversity (opposite) instead.



Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Compact ExpressCard format
- ✓ Good tuner software
- ✗ Expensive; no timeline EPG

EXPRESSCARD TV TUNER ExpressCard/34 interface, hybrid tuner, RF input
PART CODE 10448
SUPPLIER www.komplett.co.uk
DETAILS <http://uk.terratec.net>

VIRGIN MEDIA XL

★★★★★

£150 installation plus £20.50 a month



Hard disk recorders may have changed the way that we watch broadcast television, but Virgin Media has added even more flexibility with its on-demand service. Unlike rival services from Sky and Top Up TV Anytime (see awards, left), Virgin Media's service doesn't push a small selection of programmes to a set-top box's hard disk. Instead, programmes are requested and streamed in real time over the company's high-speed network. The benefits are immense and mean the library of available content is as big as Virgin Media's servers can hold. As no local storage is needed, the on-demand services are available on all Virgin Media set-top boxes, not just the V+ PVR.

We looked at the XL TV package, which has the best selection of content and comes with the HD V+ PVR. The service's biggest draw is TV Choice OnDemand, which is free to use. This is like a massive DVD library of TV series, and includes *Band of Brothers*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *The Sopranos*.

The choice is almost limitless, but more impressive is the way it works. Simply select the programme you want to watch and a few seconds later it starts playing live. You can pause, rewind and fast-forward just as if you were watching a normal recording.

If you're up to date with your TV shows, there



are lots of other things to keep you entertained. The movies choice is excellent. For between £2 and £3.50 you can 'rent' a film for 24 hours. There's a good selection of the latest titles, but there's also a big back catalogue, including every James Bond film from *Dr No* to *Casino Royale*. It's far better than anything Sky has to offer. If you've got an HD TV, there's even a selection of HD movies, although these cost up to £4.50. Movies support resuming, so you don't have to watch one all the way through in one sitting.

XL TV subscribers also get free access to the music video choice. Virgin Media has created several playlists, including big-name bands and common genres, so you can watch a good chunk of your favourite videos in one go. Sadly, you can't build your own playlist to make the service the ultimate video jukebox. Finally, there's Catch Up TV, where you can watch the best of the last week's shows from the BBC, Channel 4, Bravo and Living.

The only problem with the system is that the interface can be a bit sluggish and it takes some time to scroll through the list of programmes. This is only going to get worse as the list gets bigger, and it would be nice if a local

cache of the listings were stored on the V+ box's hard disk. As the on-demand service can

work from any set-top box this wouldn't solve the problem for everyone, but it's a start.

When you want to watch live TV, the XL service is about as good as Sky's. There's currently no Sky One, due to a disagreement over pricing, and there's only BBC HD in high definition (Sky only lets Virgin Media users subscribe to the standard-definition Sky Sports), but otherwise there's the same choice of channels, and you get Setanta Sports thrown in for nothing.

The V+ box has three tuners, compared to the two in Sky's set-top box, so you can record two channels and watch a third. The 160GB hard disk is good for around 80 hours of recording, which is the same as Sky HD. Sadly, unlike Sky's set-top boxes, V+ never goes into a low-power mode, so its loud fans run constantly, even in standby mode.

The only other things that put us off this service are the poor quality of the installation (see the pictures at <http://tinyurl.com/26818h>) and disappointing customer support, which we've been told is being improved (www.computershopper.co.uk/news/122060).

Installation and customer service issues aside, though, Virgin Media's TV service is the most advanced on-demand service, with a huge choice of programmes. It's excellent value, too, although more HD content and Sky One would make it impossible to beat.

David Ludlow

SUMMARY

- ✓ Huge library of programmes
- ✓ Excellent value
- ✗ Interface can be sluggish

DIGITAL TV SERVICE V+ PVR (160GB hard disk, HDMI, Component and SCART outputs), requires that you live in a cable area
SUPPLIER Virgin Media 0845 840 7777
DETAILS www.virginmedia.com